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THE MAKING AND TAKING OF PROBLEMS: TOWARD AN ETHICAL STANCE

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I

I have great respect for the folk-wisdom that resides in words, and hence make no apology for seeking my first orientation to my topic from etymology: more particularly so, if it gives me ground for saying what I want to say anyway.

"Ethics," which looks one way (through the Greek *ἠθικός*) to moral, and beyond that to *ἦθος*, custom, looks the other way (through its Sanskrit cognate *svādhā*) to self-will and strength—from *sva*, the self and *dhā*, to place.

There is almost, definitionally, nothing more to say: an ethic is a morality become in its settled part custom; it is self-willed, and the strength that makes possible that strenuous enactment lies in self-location, the appropriate placing of the self. The "placing of the self" is itself an act involving, actively and passively, knowledge, thought, activity—if you will, self-will. But in the beginning is the auto-locative act.

But—as, again, the folk-wisdom inherent in the dual meaning of "to take a position" indicates—it is not possible for an active agent to take a position without having, indicating, acquiring a dis-position: position and posture presuppose each other. Co-ordinate with the self-placing act is an explicit or implicit programmatic declaration; intentions are sub-stances to stances; stands imply movements; *status* (sociological word-habits to the contrary notwithstanding) implies *motus*.

Lest I be understood to say that morality becomes custom and there is an end of it (or, worse, that morality is "merely custom"), or that a stand is merely an instant in a motion, let

me clearly establish my belief that these terms are to be dialectically viewed. Going morality does indeed become mere custom, which, under civilized conditions, raises fresh unforeseen moral questions, which restructure practice and then custom, which in turn raises fresh problems for morality. And a stand is no mere moment in a motion, but a gathering, on the ground of the motion and the vision it thus far permits, of select possibilities into a richer and more coherent set (again, observe the dual meaning!) with a view to reconstruction of the motion thenceforward.

Thus it seems to be—whether we have an eye to personal history or general history, and whether we talk of the ethics of each of us, or the ethics that some of us share, hold jointly with others, whether because of our co-professionality or otherwise.

Let me, since I have implicitly broached the subject, deal with the question of the relation between personal and professional ethics. The view seems to be gaining ground, ably assisted by eminent sociologists, that we all play many roles, that these are not and need not be mutually compatible, (the only "cost" being role-strain, perhaps, and even that can be lightened by "redefinition"), that we engage in these roles "segmentally," involving only aspects or shells of our persons, and that occupational and professional roles engage only or principally the outermost shells of our personalities. I do not believe any of this. I think it is a perversion of the word "professional," upending the directions of high and low, confusing center and periphery. Outermost is in this sense to be read uttermost, and

one's profession, one's calling, vocation, *Beruf*, if it calls at all and so is a profession, calls out and calls upon all else, organizes, dominates, structures and gives point to all else. At the principal point of conjunction of the capacities for love and work, wherever topographically located in the imagination's image, it is the capital point, the high-point of the gradient of commitment. Disjuncture, then, between professional and personal ethic bespeaks the institution of that alienation from the world which would imply a poor professional and a poor profession, or from the person which entails an impoverished professional and an impoverished self.

Nor, I think (though here again sociologists have almost necessarily set forth and furthered such views) may we view the process in the patient or passive mode without paying great penalties for such a conceptualization. When Bernard Barber speaks¹ of one criterion of a profession's being "... a high degree of self-control of behavior through codes of ethics internalized in the process of work socialization. . . , " I am horrified by the direction of the thought as well as by the barbarity of the language. What is stated is neither, I think, a necessary nor a sufficient condition, for the achievement of professionalism—indeed, I should think anyone so prepared to "internalize" an ethical code in the process of "work socialization" would be an unlikely professional candidate. The very beginning of the engagement which is to lead, if anything ever will, to professionalization is the active sorting over of what is with a view to what may be and had better be. Such code as is there is not to be internalized, but carefully retained external, struggled with, wrestled with, cross-examined upon its meaning and its relation to larger ends which it only feebly points to, and there—outside, not in—reconstructed

and made over, or at least begun to be so reconstituted and reformed. A tinker's apprentice may well do what Mr. Barber says; an acolyte to a profession, a future travelling companion, has no business with such business. He is to be called, not programmed.

An ethic then, which marks a position in the present and a posture looking to the future, is grounded in what is and upborne by what is to be. It is a net cast about a future from a throw-point in a present. It represents a solution and a resolution: a solving of present problems in the form of a strategy for the future.

Such a strategy, like all grand strategies, has a structure, indeed a double structure. It has a temporal structure both with reference to order and duration. With reference to order, it must specify what we ought to do now of what we can do now, and distinguish what we ought to do later of what we will be able to do later if we have done before then what we ought to do now. And so indefinitely—perhaps in declining specificity, but nevertheless, thus. And as for duration, clearly the structure of such imperatives is like that of the law itself, consisting of passing convenient practices changeable on almost any pressing provocation, statute law, not worth passing unless it endures more than a modicum of days, constitutional law meant to serve through long historic periods and withstand almost any foreseeable storm and strain, and finally legal principles that may be thought, at least for all practical purposes, eternal, i.e., not violable by any species of society that can be said to have historic link and cultural continuity with anything we would importantly call ours.

I hope no one envisions that I shall pronounce such principles or produce such a document here. The development of even a first draft requires at least the kind and quantity of labor committed to the Constitutional Convention, and entails the common labor

¹ *Daedalus*, Fall, 1963, p. 672.

of men of equal caliber collaborating, I should think, for at least an equal length of time. But the point at which an ethical construction begins is with the commitment to search it out and to continue so to do—perhaps the ethical first or principal principle. The most I can hope to do today is to begin to lay a groundwork for the work that is to be done. Even that is hard to do because before a beginning can be made a vast and laboriously erected structure of errors and self-deceits as to who we are and what we are doing—extending to almost all going definitions—and why, needs to be cleared up, cleared out and cleared away, decisively and one might hope forever. This by itself bespeaks a book, and this is not the time or place for it. But let me begin. And let me begin where we are.

II

I suppose I must begin with what we *say* we are. We say we are social scientific students of social problems. I don't know quite what we mean by "social scientific" (or indeed whether the two terms are reconcilable) but by "students" we mean to put about and perhaps be taken in by the notion that, with regard to our subject, we look at what is to be looked at and see what is to be seen, something perhaps like a student of art, a student of history, a student of witchcraft or wines. What is the anticipated outcome? Connoisseurship (or some derivative of *connaissance*) is what comes to mind.

And what, pray, are social problems? Social problems are, so it is said:²

... breakdowns or deviations in social behavior, involving a considerable number of people, which are of serious concern to many members of the society in which the aberrations occur.

² I have not chosen a definition carelessly or at random, but have drawn of that *fons fontis et origo originis*, Merton and Nisbet, *Contemporary Social Problems*. The matter cited is at page 11.

Really?

Then the population problem of India, as long as nearly everybody is doing the same thing, and as long as not very many in Indian society are concerned (or not seriously so) is no social problem and hence not matter for a professional student of Indian social problems. But suppose he doesn't know our definition and studies, persists, publishes and doesn't perish. And suppose after a while and as a consequence, a great number are seriously concerned and a majority have reduced their fecundity, and more and more are concerning and reducing every day. Only now—when victory is in sight—do we have a social problem, and only at this point should we begin its study.

By this token, German anti-semitism and mass Jew and Gypsy burning never do become social problems. For at first the problem doesn't qualify since in the behavior that might be complained of not "a considerable number of people are involved"—indeed only a small corps of specialists. And by the time enough are involved, directly or in sympathy, it does not qualify because not "many members of the society in which the aberrations occur" regard it as a matter of serious concern. Indeed, those "concerned" would soon be the "deviant" (by any of the standard definitions) and, if the butchers didn't get them first, of enough concern to the others to constitute the social problem now worthy of study by the German sociologist!

Of course that isn't what we meant. But it serves nicely, since it is typical, to pose the problem of why we pose so, and what it is that we are hiding.

We pose so for reasons of professional politics and personal psychology. Professionally it would be wise, prudent, we seem to think, to appear to *take* our problems rather than *make* our problems, to accept as constitutive of our "intake" what is held to be "deviant," in a way that concerns

enough people in that society enough to give us primary protection. Thus Christians may be problematic in pre-Constantine Rome and non-Christians soon after. And so—up to a certain point—we do take the unwed mother rather than the unwed father, the delinquent boy or gang rather than the delinquishing society. And so saving—or sinking—ourselves politically, we save—or sink—ourselves psychologically. For so situated, at least formally, we need never confront alone or together our humanity, our tenderness, our concern, our decency, our agency or affect, our desire to intervene in history, and the actuality of that intervention, the grounds therefore, the motives thereof, the regulating principles on which we are in fact proceeding—all that redeems, justifies, and animates our efforts. Because we carry no vestments, we are not priests; since we wear no wigs, we are not judges; given that we carry no scepters, we are clearly not men of power; and since we have laid aside alike our likings and our prejudices, we are not “as social scientists” (as they say) agonists in the battle, either *pro* or *anti*.

What palpable nonsense. If we say it, it is bad. If we believe it, it is worse. If others really believed it they might wish not to limit their bullets to verbal ones.

We have been taken in just enough by our own propaganda, I think, that the table of contents of almost any “social problems” text shows a notable bias in the predictable direction. The text I have momentarily at hand³ lists among “Deviant Behavior” only Crime, Juvenile Delinquency, Mental Disorders, Drug Addiction, Suicide and Prostitution; and among “Social Disorganization” only Population Crisis, Race and Ethnic Relations, Family, Work, Military, Community and Traffic Disorganization and Disaster. The

presence of the Military chapter is unusual and somewhat happenstantial, but otherwise this is pretty well the “mix as usual,” representing our studies of categories of persons sufficiently powerless to offer small resistance to violation by enquiry. (Even the charge is old, I guess.) On the Social Disorganization side also we have a more or less customary collection of relatively unresistant units that could be disorganized and could be enquired into. Note no business disorganization, religious disorganization, intellectual anomie, political breakdown, or disorganization, debasement and degradation of the most eminent candidate: post-primary education.

Safe. Safe. Safe.

And yet this is not what we do at all. Even in this text so disguised, and *a fortiori* in the better monographs and articles, an operation goes on under cover of the approved definition (and only partly strait-jacketed by it) that bears in a different direction and operates to an opposite effect. We do, in effect, study strikes and conclude to connections with the whole structure of business ostensibly controlled not by the strikers but the managers; we do study delinquents and implicate the delinquent; we do study prison unrest and portray the jailers, justly, as just accomplices.

Whether or not this is what we intend—and I faithfully, fully and firmly believe we do—we appear, in effect, as attorneys for the defense. In principle, by taking and taking on the problem, we cause the behavior complained of (“deviant” is a moral as well as relational judgment) to appear in a natural light. And, be it noted, selectively so: whatever is not in our “natural” spotlight is presumed to be in the area of responsible moral judgment, just matter for commendation or censure, praise or blame. Thus if we establish that children lie because they are uncontrollably terrified of terrifying parents, and if we stop there,

³ *Ibid.*

palpably parents had better change or be made to change. And if we later establish that parents act terrifying because of economic insecurity, and stop there, likely the remedy for children lying will be seen to lie in the taxable pockets of the economic elite. And so on.

Nor is that all. Since everything is, even proximately, connected with many things, we choose not merely how *far* we trace out the line of causation (leaving responsibility where we arbitrarily rest) but in which of countless different directions to do so. Thus while no one ought to question the justification—provided the analysis is valid “as far as it goes”—for our passing the buck thus far, the essentially arbitrary stopping points ensure, as far as I can see, that one injustice (if only of blame-ascription) is remedied, only to bring another into existence. And—may I add—we cannot go on indefinitely: partly because of practical considerations (the ramifying chains are endless) and partly because of moral ones (carried to totality, the procedure dissolves the moral world and the world of responsible persons-in-society altogether, and brings a new society into being). Perhaps the last statement is a little misleading because what it hypothesizes is impossible: by and large, responsibility, like energy, can be passed around but not made to disappear. (The trick of passing all causal force or responsibility attribution to “the social structure” is, of course, intellectually so much nonsense, though politically consequential. Taken generally, “the social structure” is equally implicated as effect with those behaviors which we are trying to explain by treating it as a cause, i.e., “the” social structure is a structure or out-building of social behavior.)

How we function, I think, is not merely as attorneys for the defense, but attorneys for the defense of the relatively socially indigent. As far as

we go, seems mostly to me to be in the direction of passing responsibility from those less able to bear it (or those less culpable, if culpability is conditioned by means at hand) to those better able so to do or more rewarded otherwise and thus more credibly taxable. But let it not be disguised that we are acting publicans (and perhaps also, sinners). For, for want of a theory of these things, cognitive and evaluative, we distribute this negative largesse in a way that is not quite random but certainly not calculated, let alone judicious. There is a great deal to be said for “disjointed incrementalism”⁴ where nothing better can be had (or had except at undue cost) but very little to be said for a casual disjuncture—especially among those, like ourselves, accustomed to undue insistence on the organic unity of culture or society or both.

If I am right so far, we do indeed “take” our problems rather than make them, but in a fashion, refashion or remake them, so that the outcome is not the expected consequence of naïve acceptance.

But while what we do does show the desire to do good—despite all denial—I do not think it is good, or nearly good enough. Given what it is that we *are* doing, it is I think ill done.

For we proceed—individually, let alone collectively—on no known plan, with no canons of relevance or criteria of effect, under no clear vision in no defined history had and to be enacted—and with, as far as I can descry, not God-given or naturally-emergent convergence of counsel.

Dismiss the nonsense embodied in the definition of a social problem: acts committed by persons as few as our national presidents, of concern at first to almost no one, not the least bit un-American or deviant or evidently a breakdown, might, to a sociologist in

⁴ Lindblom and Braybrook’s happy phrase.

the know, not only be a social problem but one worthy of great and urgent study.

But if you dismiss this view, as I do, and think *we* must, you are left with an awful responsibility: you become a social critic, and moreover, to the degree that you thus make instead of take your problems, an unwelcome one, and one, therefore, open to unfriendly counter-criticism or worse. So a sizeable increase in prudence is well advised.

What is prudentially recommended is, moreover, morally mandated if we are to be other than captious or perhaps carping. For criticism that is anywise a professional performance is not only taken from a credible critical position, but conforms to canons that signify in effect a strategy-in-sight. And that implies that we know in acceptable fullness not only where we want to go—or want the society to go—but how we want it to get there, and how the criticism is to function in the getting of it there. And, moreover, since we pride ourselves in being in some sense scientists, that we do in fact know something significant and reliable as to the effects of our successive interventions.

Which brings me to a general aside, before I go on. An adequate ethic would specify not only what we ought to do but what we ought to know—and, even here, in what order. In a moderately well established field such as medicine, obviously it is negligent (i.e., morally reprehensible as well as technically inept) to prescribe without knowledge of certain kinds, and in certain cases such lack of knowledge, far from functioning as an excuse, would establish the fact of criminality, legally, and the basis for professional penalties, socially, and justified serious adversion, morally.

Let me tell you what else I think we do, and do ill and unguided by

more than vague hunches and social suppositions that—in others—we would label naïve. (I must be summary here though I have spoken more fully on these points⁵ at other times and in other places.)

In a society that, on our own showing, may be said to be a society in virtue of substantial unity of important beliefs and schemes of "evaluation," we intervene increasingly and quite decisively to alter beliefs, among them the core or crucial general beliefs and attitudes. On our own showing also, we must suppose that sufficient such shakes to the belief-system and jabs and jolts to the "mores" must at the very least carry with it the risk of that social sickness which we have ourselves designated as "anomie." More particularly would we expect such outcomes to ensue if we could create a Tower of Babel effect: everyone talking at once, in terms of a great variety of mutually incompatible schemes and models, about "problems" selected and attended to in no particular order or sequence, and then dropped or brushed into the corner or no rational dictation, as we are brushed by the waves of intellectual fashion or battered by considerations of extra-professional "funding."

⁵ See, e.g., John R. Seeley, "Psychoanalysis: Model for Social Science," in *Psychoanalysis and Social Science*, Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek (Ed.), New York: Dutton, 1962; "Personal Science," in *The Urban Condition*, L. J. Duhl (Ed.), New York: Basic Books, 1963; "Social Science: Some Probative Problems," in *Sociology on Trial*, Maurice Stein et al., (Eds.), New York: Prentice, 1963; "Intellectual and Libidinal Dimensions of Research," in *Reflections on Community Studies*, A. J. Vidich et al., (Eds.), New York: Wiley, 1964; "The Problem of Social Problems," *Ind. Sociol. Bull.*, April, 1965; "Social Psychology, Self and Society" in *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 1, Fall, 1965; "Toward a Theory of Social Theory," in *The Critical Spirit: Essays in Honor of Herbert Marcuse*, Kurt H. Wolff et al. (Eds.), Boston: Beacon, 1967, as well as *Crestwood Heights*, etc.

But this—like a collection of mad doctors—is what indeed we do do.⁶

Worse, perhaps, such “intelligence” as we do secure—and, it should be so viewed as potential advantage-creating information for those who have it over those who don’t—is, partly by inadvertence, and partly by an inbuilt characteristic of the system, distributed in such ways as to further power-disparities and diminish resistance-possibilities in the already relatively powerless. Thus employers learn of projective tests and other armor-piercing paraphernalia before employees do, partly because we do not take pains to the contrary, and partly since our publishing practices require time and literacy of a sort that employers can hire while, generally, their “labor pool” cannot.

I could go on drawing up a bill of particulars covering those things small and great that I believe we do and ought not to do, and do not do, but ought to. But that—to draw an exhaustive indictment—is not my purpose here, nor anyway within the compass of brief possibility.

What, given these views, do I believe we ought to do?⁷

We should, I think, to begin with, gather out a company of those who believe at least that there is a *prima facie* warrant for concern, who believe we may do something and who are willing to begin.

We might, next, actively, rapidly, but not superficially, explore for a common consent in those large principles that have seemed to many to

be the meeting ground for all humane and reasonable men, and for others to have the nature and status of “natural law.” We may thus be committing ourselves to an endless debate, but I believe even this, by its direct and indirect producings, justifies itself of its costs.

We should next, I think, establish more nearly where we are by a careful and critical examination and evaluation of what we have been doing and are doing. If we have one eye to theory—and I do not doubt that we shall—we should have the other and closer eye to society. What have we, even at first blush, done with, to or for society? What society? What things have we not done that we ought to have done, and what things done that we ought not to have done, and what health is there in us?

We should then, I think, with utmost rapidity build up that almost utterly neglected body of knowledge without which it is, in my opinion, not possible to operate responsibly at all: a knowledge of the effects, first proximate, then more remote (in time and social space) of our own actions and inactions.

We should, third, I believe, bring into the open, elaborate, discuss, debate, re-form and reformulate those covert (and often vague) utopias, partial or total—or those “better states of affairs,” general or particular—that all of us carry around in our hearts and heads, and that justify—and, I think, motivate—a great deal of the effort we expend anyway. Such discussion as is here suggested would lead back into and render vivid those more general principles spoken of earlier, while it might also begin to give the latter enough particularity to prepare the ground for a collision with actual and existent states-of-affairs-to-be-improved-or-made-over.

As we begin to bring these beginnings together we would initiate, I should think, an appropriate endless

⁶ I hope few will be able to kid themselves that society is protected well enough anyway, and that the babble is safe because the noise all cancels out. Both are, I think, unlikely social effects.

⁷ I neglect altogether here—though I do not think trivial—such questions as have been widely dealt with: problems as to whether we may or may not steal our students’ work (for example) or may or may not rend the fabric of faith by lying to research subjects in reference to what we do clearly know ourselves to be doing.

dialectic in which the claims and cogencies of long and short perspectives, undying general principle and proximate practical proposal, present locations, desired future states and transition possibilities (in all their actual interpenetration), and the respective claims of knowing, and doing, acting and reflecting, could be brought into never-ending collision and cohabitation. We would then, I think, have the beginning of a profession.

You may ask at the last about "sanctions" (a good sociological term): rewards and penalties. Naïvely perhaps, I do not think any are required or will be. If a profession related to society in moral and intellectual responsibility should come into being,

and if an expanding body of knowledge to make that responsibility real and to reinforce and particularize and expand it, should arise, I believe men will know us for what we are, and we shall not lack for the rewards we should properly wish nor need sanctions to protect and defend us from those who do otherwise. In any case, if I have understood men aright, and the motives of professionals when they are not prey to fashionable deceits, the rewards and penalties are intrinsic to the practices, and in the power of no man to bestow or withhold, to offer or refuse.

Or so at this moment of our history and this stage of my life, with such light as I have, it seems to me.

ALIENATION, STRUCTURAL STRAIN, AND POLITICAL DEVIANCY: A TEST OF MERTON'S HYPOTHESIS

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Sociological theories about deviant behavior are something of a paradox. If it is true that social disorganization, defined as a condition of normlessness, creates disequilibrium and sets the stage for social change, and if it is also true that increasing rates of social deviancy are, at some point, tantamount to social disorganization, then social deviancy must be considered an important factor in social change. On the other hand, some social theorists have focused on the functions of social deviancy in maintaining social equilibrium, claiming that deviancy provides negative role models for those who conform and that there are times when a certain amount of deviancy acts as a sort of safety-valve, allowing pressures to be dissipated which might otherwise produce social change. Since there is undoubtedly some truth in both these positions, social deviancy may be quite

variable in terms of its impact on social change. It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that before we can make viable theories about the relationship between deviancy and social change, we must first learn something about the nature, types, and functions of deviant behavior. Basically, this is the motivation behind the present study.

The specific form of deviancy to be explored in this study is deviancy from political norms within the academic world. Obviously the first objective of the study must be to decide whether there is any meaningful sociological sense in which one may say that political norms exist within the academic community. In making this decision the statistical distribution of certain forms of political behavior will be taken into account; but this is not simply a matter of statistics, for most